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A Deduction from the Statistics of Crime for the last Ten Years. By
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[Abstract of Paper read before Section F, Economic Science and Statistics, of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, at Cheltenham, on Monday, the 11th August, 1856.]

A THEORY has lately grown up, that when the people suffer privation they refrain from crime, but fall into excesses when prosperity returns. This notion, opposed to the *malesuada fames* of the poet, is based on some criminal statistics principally composed of the records of summary convictions in a few localities. But it is not fair to estimate the morality of a nation by the number of petty offences committed in one or two districts, or even throughout the entire country. The returns of the summary convictions before magistrates do not afford a correct test either of the number of prohibited acts committed, or of the guilt of the perpetrators. Most of the offences which swell these returns are of a very trivial character, and at one time the acts which constitute such offences are committed with impunity, while, at another, the excessive vigilance of the police, and over energy of the public in the assertion of their rights, let nothing escape. But even if these alternate fits of remissness and zeal (the necessary consequences of the petty nature and trivial character of the offences in question) did not occur, and if the summary convictions afforded a true representation of the *quantum* of prohibited acts committed, the test they furnish must be objected to. A more accurate measure of crime is to be found in the returns offences sent for trial to assizes and quarter sessions. These are usually of a serious and well defined character, and, for that very reason, the acts which constitute them are rarely committed without being made the subject of legal investigation. These are the returns to be employed in measuring the morality of a nation, and they should not be mixed up with the summary convictions. To do so is to be guilty of the absurdity of confounding together, as if they were on a footing of equality, the most serious offences and trifling misdemeanours, and placing in the same category with the robber and murderer the man who slights the dignity of a policeman, needlessly offends an irascible wayfarer, or happens to drive on the wrong side of the road.

The returns of the committals for trial at assizes and quarter sessions in England and Wales, from 1844 to 1854 (the last years for which they have been published), show clearly that crime increases when the physical condition of the people deteriorates, and *vice versâ*. In 1844, the number of committals was 26,542; 1845, 24,303; 1846, 25,107; 1847, 28,833; 1848, 30,349; 1849, 27,816; 1850, 26,813; 1851, 27,960; 1852, 27,510; 1853, 27,057; and in 1854, 29,359. The first year in which the committals increased is 1847, a year of distress; they rose then by nearly 4,000. This rise was maintained with an addition of nearly 1,500 in 1848, likewise a year of distress, partly owing to the same causes as in 1847, and partly on account of

political disturbances and apprehensions. In 1849, the causes which before had depressed the condition of the labourers died away; food was cheap and employment abundant. Emigration had removed many of the working classes, and those who remained at home found the demand for their services increased, and accordingly in that year we find the committals decline by nearly 2,500. The succeeding years were likewise seasons of prosperity, and during these the criminal returns exhibit no marked fluctuation. In the last year of the series the number of committals rose by a little over 2,000, but, at the same time, the condition of the people was impaired owing to the enhanced price of food and other necessities of life, and also to the waste of the national resources and partial derangement of trade occasioned by the war. It may be observed in conclusion, that if the number of committals in 1844 was but 26,542, and in 1854, 29,359, the population had increased in the interval in a greater proportion.

The criminal returns for Ireland tell a similar tale, when we take into account the changes experienced in the physical condition of the people. Indeed, this lesson is the more instructive from the fact of the changes in the conditions of the people having been greater than those experienced in England, so that the corresponding fluctuations in crime exhibit more strongly the marked connexion between the two. During the years of distress the committals rose to over 40,000, and when prosperity visited the land they fell to less than a fourth of that number. The returns of the summary convictions (as might be expected) do not exhibit in their fluctuations any constant relation to the changes in the physical condition of the people. But as far as they go, they more frequently follow the same than an opposite course to that of the other criminal returns. So much for the results of the statistics of summary convictions, the class of offences from which it had been inferred that poverty and privation are conducive to popular morality. But taking the statistics of real and formidable offences, we arrive at the more agreeable conclusion, that when the people are comfortable they are well conducted, while it is only when they suffer privation, that a general increase of crime takes place.
